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Claire Keegan: Silences that speak volumes

Jytte Holmqvist¹

Abstract

Open-ended, controlled, and graphic, Claire Keegan's narrative style is powerfully brief and succinct and her mastery with the short story form has garnered global attention. Allowing herself limited space to share her depths and insights, she portrays slivers of lives and pieces of Irish history by getting to the point and introducing us to characters who in an almost chronicle-like fashion represent national stereotypes. Their queries and anxieties are set in narratives within a provincial Irish context expressing local concerns yet possessing wider relevance as universal issues. Their fates bind us across cultural borders and divides, therein lie their wider relevance. This essay inserts Keegan in an existentialist framework and draws on Zygmunt Bauman, Walter Benjamin, and Susan Sontag while focussing on stories where the mundane hides deeper concerns which are expressed less through verbal communication than pauses and silences charged with emotion.

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I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary

(Louise Glück)

Introduction and interconnecting points between Keegan, Sontag, and Benjamin

Keegan's skill resides in her ability to communicate select episodes of a life not through words but through ellipses, omission,

compression, selection,² and silences, and the exploration of a space between. Pauses and delays are narrative tools through which she draws us in and expands our vision. Stylistically and thematically, her literature is defined not so much by what is being said, as by what is suggested or hinted at. In this way, Keegan elicits readers' agency by engaging their imagination through the "unworded" or what is not readily expressed nor expressible. Commended by fellow national Colm Tóibín, "one of the contemporary masters of silence, exile, and cunning,"³ and compared to Raymond Carver, Alice Munro, William Trevor, and Anton Chekhov, Keegan draws attention to the plight of the voiceless and the

¹ Lund University (orcid.org/0000-0003-0878-6389).

² Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero, *Narratives of the Unspoken*, 7.

³ Niedenthal, "An interview with Colm Tóibín."

downtrodden, small, weak, and marginalised in an often castigating Catholic system that favours the silent collective above the free-thinking individual – as seen in *Small Things Like These* (2020).

In Keegan's literature, silence, or a momentary hiatus does its own talking, and the author breaks ground by revealing truths without verbosity. Swiftly getting to the essence and the core of the matter, her style is sparse and effective and her stories reflect a stylistic awareness and a transition from extreme realism to absurdism and surreality – the fine line between two worlds often blurred by the author shifting from an initially realistic space to unrealistic occurrences. The unreal quickly appears to be uncomfortably, sometimes even ghoulishly, real. Concentrated on the "quality of seeing"⁴ or what Susan Sontag has called "a move into silence"⁵ (her expression carrying somewhat negative connotations, yet it will here be applied in positive terms), Keegan cuts to the chase without cutting corners and demonstrates how reality can be subjective, and consists of multiple truths.

We are presented a host of characters, scenes from whose lives are told in fragments or narrative bursts; the "gaps in the story reflect what remains unspoken between its characters."⁶ As we are tangibly affected by their ordeals, we walk beside them if only for a moment and sense their anxiety as they face

situations that make them question their own reality – and sanity – and from which there may be no way out. Likewise, we –not so indirectly – question our own volatile existence as the fictive words exit the page, enter our own reality, and speak to us on an existential level.

We, too, are plagued by ongoing queries and conundrums at a time when the individual is directly affected by the rash decisions of Western politicians with the capability to not so much move mountains as shake our foundations; their decisions causing ripple effects on societies across the world. As Zygmunt Bauman aptly sums it up at a point in a past that has become our present, and where he partly quotes British economist Guy Standing: as "*denizens* of the postmodern habitat"⁷ we form a part of a *precariat* where we are forced to move on *quicksands* and are barely able to stand upright on the slippery slope of a precarious contemporary existence.⁸ Much the same as citizens today, the characters inhabiting Keegan's fictive universe are likewise flawed, naked, and insecure, but in their vulnerability they are more authentic. They step forth as complex individuals whose conundrums ultimately become symbolic of the "human condition," a notoriously vague but apt concept referring to our current existence and where we realise, more often than not, how interconnected we actually are.

⁴ Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story*, 255.

⁵ Sontag argues that "[t]he exemplary modern artist's choice of silence isn't often carried to [a]... point of final simplification, so that he becomes literally silent. More typically, he continues speaking, but in a manner that his audience can't hear. Most valuable art in our time has been experienced by audiences as a move into silence (or unintelligibility or invisibility or inaudibility); a dismantling of the artist's competence, his responsible sense of vocation – and therefore as an aggression against them." Sontag, "The aesthetics of silence," 7.

⁶ D'Hoker, "The Irish short story and the aesthetics of silence," 88. Keegan's narrative technique brings to mind, albeit in quite a different context, Walter Benjamin's observation in "Allegory and Trauerspiel" in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* that "the authority of a statement depends so little on its comprehensibility that it can actually be increased by obscurity" (207). Keegan's words are fragmentary dialogues illuminated by their own obscurity; they are rendered complete when the reader interprets what is left unsaid.

⁷ Dennis Smith, *Zygmunt Bauman: Prophet of Postmodernity*.

⁸ Bauman, *A Chronicle of Crisis 2011-2016*, 115.

Providing just enough details, Keegan paints a clear picture but does not countenance small talk; her dialogues may be wordy at times, but they serve to paint a naturalistically stark picture that portrays a gloomy Van Gogh painting, and where her words likewise transport us into sombre milieus. Drawing on wit, sarcasm, and observation, and using interrogative techniques as narrative tools, she embraces superstition, mysticism, and “folkloric supernaturalism”⁹. Her style verges on the cinematic and loosely resembles the “Argentinian Mary Shelley”, Mariana Enríquez, whose texts are similarly visceral or suggestively graphic and inserted into a sociopolitical framework. As has been – and will continuously be – highlighted throughout the chapter discourse, silences, or references to lingering emotions not addressed in words, becomes another powerful narrative device. Susan Sontag – with the expert’s photographic attention to detail and an astute ability to see and sense also what is not there – provides an important vision and lens through which to interpret Keegan’s work; a literary oeuvre which, to date, is, indeed, a “form of mystification”¹⁰. In her astute ability to transport the mundane into the realm of the magical, Keegan, one could argue, ventures further into the fantastical¹¹ through her focus on the darker underside of what on the surface looks like functional outsets and conditions but that gradually escalate into dysfunctional new realities as the narratives take a turn for the worse and lay bare the characters’ psychological entrapment.

In an analysis of Keegan’s work, Walter Benjamin likewise is a vital theoretical source

with regard to his praise of storytelling as a medium, and his emphasis on storytelling as “the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when stories are no longer retained”. Also, Benjamin claims that stories are embedded in a tradition of “historiography” and “written history” being “in the same relationship to the epic forms as white light is to the colours of the spectrum”¹². He converges with Sontag in that interconnecting artistic space of “photographic literature” and creative interdisciplinarity becomes particularly important in his allegorical considerations, as expressed in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928). Here, Benjamin refers to literature as *ars inveniendi* and fantasy as a privilege of few, a “criterion of a spiritual hierarchy.”¹³

Although short-lived, Benjamin was prolific and produced “essays on children’s literature, toys, gambling, graphology, pornography, travel, folk art, the art of excluded groups such as the mentally ill; food; and on a wide variety of media including film, radio, photography, and the illustrated press.”¹⁴ To Benjamin, allegory – by which a story conveys (more, or less) hidden meanings and speaks through images – is an expansive concept; it involves interpreting any object, image, or text as having multiple meanings, layers, and interpretations. He highlights the fragmentary aspects of allegory and argues that “[t]he allegorist finds meaning even in wreckage and ruin”¹⁵ – a statement echoed by Craig Owens who explains that “[a]llegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete – an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin, which

⁹ Smith, “Elemental and plain,” 3.

¹⁰ Sontag, op.cit. 5.

¹¹ This is likewise a concern of the Latin American “boom” authors of the 1960s–1970s.

¹² Walter Benjamin, “The storyteller,” 91, 95, respectively.

¹³ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 179.

¹⁴ See Harvard University Press Staff, “Walter Benjamin.”

¹⁵ Wall, “Reflections on Walter Benjamin.”

Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence.”¹⁶

Accordingly, Benjamin dismantles the concept of time and determines that this fluid concept is not definable chronologically or in a linear fashion. Rather, it is secondary to the historical significance of certain key events. A narrative theme, or certain occurrences, thus takes precedence to any sequential representation of time, and the reader is holistically engaged by being invested in the storytelling (and story-learning) process as active listeners. In relation to this, Benjamin draws an inherent sensory link between an event and sound, with the latter functioning like an echo; “a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of a past life.”¹⁷

Likewise, Claire Keegan’s fiction becomes a sensorial experience where echoes and rustling of memories often replace words whereby feelings and sensations are superior to the spoken or written word.¹⁸ In relation to Benjamin, Keegan shares historical knowledge in order for the reader to perceive the quality of the story rather than treating the reader as a consumer of multiple stories. It is in the spaces, in the omissions and suggestions where the reader is offered agency – and responsibility – to use their imagination in order to fill in the gaps. The storyteller recedes and the story is transferred from its sender or creator to the mind and memory of its recipient/the

reader, where it partly takes on a new life as characters and readers enter into silent dialogue. To borrow a term from Marshall McLuhan, “the medium” becomes the message as the reader replaces the sender at the point of active engagement with the text in front of them. Keegan, who on first impression paints discernible pictures in narratives that have repeatedly been transported (literally and metaphorically) from page to screen, presents us with situations and scenarios that are more than meets the eye – as shall be demonstrated in an analysis of several of her literary works.

Sontag, in turn, and on par with Benjamin, coincides with Keegan in her reflections on the purpose of art and the struggle of the artist to embark on a “path of authentic sublimation.”¹⁹ She recommends that modern artists embrace an “aesthetics of silence” in their quest to “express the inexpressible”.²⁰ Keegan manages this by developing stories in local settings which represent the mundane yet her narratives are driven by existentialist queries and concerns and she speaks through ellipsis and what has been called a “gnomonic” structure where “what is spoken or left out nonetheless becomes part of the telling”.²¹ Keegan’s “authentic sublimation” resides in her ability to tell stories in a limited number of words yet not in haste but through selective deliberation. Conscious of her audience she shines a dim light in her narrative darkness by ultimately teaching us a new way of reading

¹⁶ Owens, “The allegorical impulse,” 55.

¹⁷ Benjamin, “A Berlin chronicle,” 59.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin famously argues that “[t]here is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller foregoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely it is integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later.” Benjamin, “The storyteller,” 91.

¹⁹ This becomes a tricky endeavour as the artist has to strike a balance between appealing to the client, whose aesthetic appreciation and monetary capacity they are dependent on, and eventually reaching the level of freedom where they can meet art where art should be met: in a space of spiritual transcendence (art through its own restrictions here is no longer “the enemy of the artist.” Sontag, “The aesthetics of silence,” 5–6.

²⁰ Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero, op.cit., 2.

²¹ Lynch, “Families can be awful places,” 132.

books and advising the reader to be mindful to what is not there. As a wordsmith of few expressions, Keegan informs but to a greater extent she challenges the reader and never falls prey to common expectations.²² Every word counts yet where the thought takes over, she creates a space for imagination – and this is where her stories and their deeper meaning and significance emerge.

Social awareness, stylistic preferences, and existential concerns

Developed in a local setting and driven by existential concerns, some of Keegan's narratives query, without delivering a "direct commentary on contemporary issues"²³. Instead, she explores what it means to be Irish at a shapeshifting time of social and political change and its impact on the gradual erosion of the self. Historically and socially aware, she delivers a commentary on Celtic Tiger boom and subsequent economic bust but is ultimately interested in the fate of the common man – and woman – and what we have coming at and to us.

By being engaged in their own identity politics, some of her characters have unconsciously embarked on an introspective journey where they reach some kind of personal truth, however in their queries they are informed by national issues affecting Ireland at large. Ireland: their home; a mythical and mystical country proud of its past glories and achievements and resting on

ancient legends. And yet, fast forward to today and stark reality, it is an increasingly modernised country (still) dealing with issues like gender inequality, including misogyny – a theme addressed by Keegan in her most recent book *So Late in the Day* (2023), – and needing to keep pace with the rest of Europe as a long-standing EU member.

Opting for the quick intensity of the short story form to tell realistic tales that combine life with fiction (what is life, if not informed by fiction?),²⁴ Keegan, who resides in a country that according to census data is becoming ever less Catholic,²⁵ describes this genre as:

synonymous with suddenness, intensity, visual impact, contemplation and imagination. In other words, the short story allows the writer to show glimpses of changing Irish social mores, and to achieve a rapid and incisive insight into these changes, particularly when compared to the more leisurely procedures of the novel.²⁶

With that, she reveals much of the intention behind her stories: slow tales of comfort then sudden unease; a transition from the momentarily familiar to eerie wilderness. And rather than providing protection, in her novels the Catholic Church becomes a corrupt and condemning institution whose dogma infiltrates minds and turns the collective against individuals with a querying and inquisitive mind.²⁷ Many of Keegan's texts are ultimately universal as she crafts stories that take on a life of their own and, when stripped of their

²² Sontag calls silence "the artist's ultimate other-worldly gesture: by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world, which appears as a patron, client, audience, antagonist, arbiter, and distorter of his work." Op.cit. 6.

²³ Smith, "Autonomy, naturalism, and folklore," 193.

²⁴ Ridgway, "Everything is fiction."

²⁵ Kelly, "Census."

²⁶ Gallego, "Claire Keegan's use of satire," 81.

²⁷ In Jack Sheehan's observation, Keegan uses "deft strokes" and "builds the Ireland of the early '80s, superficially modernized but gripped by severe economic distress and a reactionary alliance of church and state, exhibiting the trademark violence of the powerful under threat."

cultural specificities, concern us on a common level. Often opting for third person narrative, she heightens tension by exposing cracks in apparently idyllic lives or situations that often push the characters to the brink of disaster, as seen in the collections *Antarctica* and *Walk the Blue Fields*. Or sometimes we are confronted by a much-needed truth, as in *Small Things Like These*.

Words that reveal larger realities and *Small Things Like These* (2020)

While I stress the importance of *Small Things Like These* as a text that constitutes the pinnacle of Keegan's literary career, this essay is concentrating on *Foster* and the disconcerting tales making up *Antarctica* and *Walk the Blue Fields* where existential queries and conundrums are central to stories focussed on the precarious existence of the main characters. Sweeping references are made to her standalone bestseller already analysed in my article, as I have argued elsewhere.²⁸

In these multilayered stories Keegan reveals multiple truths. A narrative chameleon and in-betweenner, she is "interested in transitions, paragraph structure, in what happens between paragraphs, those leaps in time."²⁹ *Small Things Like These* is, indeed, a leap in time yet in its holistic narrative it patches up fragments and insecurities relating to its male protagonist; rendering him complete and convinced about his own truth, and an Ireland unable or unwilling to reveal, or deal with, the darker trappings of the Catholic Church. In a much-

needed truth-telling Christmas tale about the Irish Magdalen Laundries, also known as the Magdalen Asylums, and its exploitation of (often pregnant) young women confined and forced into unpaid labour, what initially feels right to the coalminer Bill Furlong as an agent leaping into action, is what IS right. A bearer of truth and a prophet, he becomes our collective conscience; an unlikely hero standing up to an Ireland protective and defensive of – but also governed, chastised, and paralysed by – an omnipresent church.

Keegan demonstrates how "themes of silence are often intertwined, reflecting the ambivalent value of silence in contemporary Irish society,"³⁰ and that small things tend to hide larger realities. Keegan's language becomes a medium through which she demonstrates how past experiences and institutional pressure cast a long shadow on the present. As she plunges into historical darkness and lingering wounds, she uses figurative language where the images speak for themselves. It is up to the reader to reflect further on her stories and pay heed by confronting and learning from the past being explored. While Keegan provides the tools, the reader needs to "interpret the signs"³¹ and become conscious of the importance of addressing past injustices – in order for history not to repeat.

***Foster* (2010)**

Keegan's earlier standalone "long short story" *Foster* crosses genres when her reflective childhood tale speaks of deeper affective issues and complex family structures.³² There

²⁸ Holmqvist, "Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*."

²⁹ Keegan and Tóibín, "The Art of Reading Book Club."

³⁰ D'Hoker, op.cit., 94.

³¹ Sheehan, "It's time to read Claire Keegan."

³² The book has been called a text "as rich and emotionally resonant as a heaping 400-page tome", and "a gentle yarn about a small girl who is thrown upon the kindness of strangers while her mother gives birth to yet another baby." See Gilvary, "A summer in foster care," and Armitstead, "Interview: Claire Keegan: 'I think something needs to be as long as it needs to be,' respectively.

is initially a slightly ominous undercurrent running through this text that speaks of fear of abandonment and sees a girl being removed from her parents and given to a childless aunt and uncle up the road (“the Kinsellas”). The setting is a farm in County Wexford. The girl’s story spills into the reader’s universe, representing an alternative reality characterised by “slow rhythms of rural life” and an “older Ireland”.

On a fictive summer’s day, a father leaving his daughter in the (temporary) care of hospitable foster parents, and the light of the season contrasts with the narrative darkness of *Small Things Like These* (even if *Foster* ends on a slightly ominous note). By telling the story alternatively in dialogical format and as an inner monologue (“I watch him reverse, turn in the lane, and drive away. I hear the wheels slam over the cattle grid, then the changing of gears and the noise of the motor going back the road we came”³³), Keegan effectively explores liminal spaces and the girl’s transition from innocence to realisation, from initial hesitation and apprehension to a new sense of belonging, increased independence, self-reliance, and maturity.

As a narrative backdrop to the new circumstances, we are made aware of adult concerns in the Clonegal community. At the time, Ireland was very much at the legislative mercy of the European Economic Community, required to satisfy its many demands as a competing member. The global enters the local when Irish concerns at large seep into the narrative and Keegan’s characters act as national stereotypes whose lives are directly affected by shifting politics. As has been noted:

Keegan’s world is a provincial one, and her characters, mostly farmers, discuss things

like “the price of cattle, the E.E.C., butter mountains, the cost of lime and sheep-dip.” This adult world is mostly overheard by our narrator and observed with precise insight: “It is something I am used to, this way men have of not talking: They like to kick a divot out of the grass with a boot heel, to slap the roof of a car before it takes off.”³⁴

A rapid succession of events, the focus on the mundane and the everyday, on sleep, cleaning, and work, and yet a warmth emanating from the foster parents and the possibility for a child to embrace a parallel reality for however long. Time passes quickly, and the girl’s potential loneliness gives way to a different kind of familiarity where the external noise is gone, and with that, a spiritual imbalance. In this new home, silence reigns but it is a comfortable silence: one that heals and restores. It also allows for a healthy approximation of the male to the female:

“‘You don’t ever have to say anything,’ he says. ‘Always remember that as a thing you need never do. Many’s the man lost much just because he missed a perfect opportunity to say nothing.’”³⁵

In the discovery of “room”, of “time to think”, and “I feel at such a loss for words but this is a new place, and new words are needed”,³⁶ the yearnings and satisfactions of the female protagonist reflect the needs within all of us to abandon the rigidity and predictability of our home, to break away from shelter, and step into a new setting in order to explore new inner landscapes. It is a cathartic story about birth and rebirth where the silent observation of the young girl allows her to inhabit what Sontag

³³ Keegan, *Foster*, 15.

³⁴ Gilvarry, op.cit.

³⁵ Citing John Kinsella in Keegan, *Foster*, 64.

³⁶ Keegan, *Foster*, 13, 18, respectively.

calls a “zone of meditation” and a “preparation for spiritual ripening”³⁷ where she learns to accept her new domestic circumstances and unconsciously prepares herself for the next chapter to come.

Claudia Luppino compares Keegan’s description of the girl’s first entrance into the Kinsellas’ house “to a birth-scene (the alternation of darkness and light, of coolness and warmth, of smells of food and detergents, and the woman and the child sharing the novelty of being alone together – it is the girl’s second birth, as it were, to a new life).”³⁸ There are also redefined mother roles and likewise a girl’s longing for an alternative father figure. And [e]verything that “changes into something else” yet “turns into some version of what it was before.”³⁹

Politically, in this book and her oeuvre in general, Keegan also seems to be symbolising Ireland’s desire to fit into the larger European community, its history of widespread migration in the 1980s, and “migration culture” triggered by the prospect among citizens to find employment overseas during a time of professional national drought. From this perspective, *Foster* bridges the realm of the domestic, the homely and familiar, with larger matters relating to Ireland as a nation with a long history of resettlement. From this perspective, the migrant is likewise seeking to fit in and find a new sense of belonging in what comes across as a better home away from home.

***Antarctica* (1999) and *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007)**

Lastly in my analysis I consider Keegan’s two short-story collections *Antarctica* and *Walk the*

Blue Fields. Keegan here adds unpredictable twists to her representations of mundane everyday realities by drawing on her own version of the supernatural and establishing a dialogue between the ordinary and the absurdly extraordinary. We might agree that in several of these stories “the past is constructed by the present”⁴⁰ in the sense that their narrative and thematic intensity has an impact on the way we reinterpret the past, and what led up to the present moment of Keegan’s narrative conundrums. As has been established – Keegan narratively commenting on male domination over women and the vulnerability of the latter – “[e]ach story balances somewhere between the frustration and fear of lonely men and the way their greed and hunger grow in the dark.”⁴¹ Keegan here presents us different worlds and scenarios where the inner collides with the outer, the internal merges with the external, and through the apparently utopic, we start to glimpse its dystopian underside.

In the 23 stories that make up these two volumes, some of the characters had their fate coming all along. By sleepwalking in a trancelike state straight into an impending yet possibly foreseeable crisis, they become their own worst enemies. They doggedly chase some kind of fleeting happiness, as in the quietly unnerving opening story of *Antarctica*, which bears its name. In this overtly sinister horror story about longing and loneliness and desires gone wrong, Keegan takes us to the centre, and into the abyss. A woman momentarily fleeing marital frustration is trapped in the cold in every sense of the word after a bondage affair with a stranger renders her literally and symbolically paralysed; her numbing anguish and despair affecting us viscerally.

³⁷ Sontag, op.cit. 6.

³⁸ Luppino, “Arrivals and departures,” 115.

³⁹ Keegan, *Foster*, 26.

⁴⁰ Stead, “The value of ruins,” 56.

⁴¹ Sheehan, op.cit.

Up to the final page, she is held captive in an unknown location, removed from her physical and emotional comfort zone. There is no way out. Tied to a bed in a room far away from civilisation as we know it; in a strange city, abandoned by a stranger and estranged to herself and everything she once knew and which constituted her reality, she is now unable to move and is transfixed by a feline with eyes “dark as apple seeds,” her racing mind taking her cold places littered with “the bodies of dead explorers.”⁴² The effect on the reader is raw, acute, and cinematic. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, his words extracted from their original Dadaist context, the ending of “Antarctica”, hits the reader/spectator

like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality. It promoted a demand for the film, the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator.⁴³

In *Walk the Blue Fields*, the clever cliffhanger ending of the similarly unsettling “The long and painful death” brings the story to its anticipatory close. Keegan’s characters stumble and fall and an acute sense of malaise stays with the reader long after the story has come to an end. We struggle to breathe but must come up for air as a relentless Keegan takes us on the next ride into nauseating vertigo. In the *Antarctica* collection, to a greater extent than *Walk the Blue Fields*, Keegan coincides

with aforementioned Mariana Enríquez in her ability to serve up stories that draw us in and freak us out at once. Her sentences seem wordier than in her independent novellas and she shares Tóibín’s tendency in *Brooklyn* (2009) to embrace the themes of time and adaptability and to make “undramatic incidents and people enormously involving”.⁴⁴ And yet, Keegan’s representation of time is one where she simultaneously expands and compresses, creating both a captivating and a taxing sense of urgency and intensity, her reader joining her in an exploration of the human psyche.⁴⁵

Rather than adapting to their new and unforeseen circumstances, the struggling characters populating Keegan’s stories protest and refuse to accept their own fate. They quietly rage against situations that jeopardise their own safety and threaten to destroy the surface utopia that was impossible all along; utopia being a notoriously slippery concept that Bauman identifies as an individual “hunting zone”⁴⁶ where we engage in lonely pursuit of a better society that is, often, out of reach and where “progress seems no longer to be about improvement but about survival.”⁴⁷ Michael Hviid Jacobsen further reflects on the lasting legacy of the Polish sociologist and argues that,

Zygmunt Bauman’s work is notorious for offering no nostrum, no wonder-cure and no social elixir against the problems confronting contemporary society. His apparent critical pessimism must rather be seen as a wake-up call to the world. He

⁴² Keegan, *Antarctica*, 21.

⁴³ Benjamin, “The work of art,” 238.

⁴⁴ Jordison, “Guardian book club: ‘Brooklyn’ by Colm Tóibín.”

⁴⁵ Conscious of the narrative darkness in many of Keegan’s works yet aware of her stylistic brilliance, Tóibín calls her stories “pure magic. They add, using grace, intelligence and an extraordinary ear for rhythm, to the distinguished tradition of the Irish short story.” See Grove Atlantic, *Walk the Blue Fields*.

⁴⁶ “We are all hunters now, or told to be hunters and compelled to act like hunters, on the penalty of eviction from hunting – if not of relegation to the ranks of the game. No wonder then that looking around we see mostly other lonely hunters like us, or hunters hunting in packs which we also occasionally try to do. What we do and see is called ‘individualization.’ Bauman, “Living in Utopia.”

⁴⁷ Jacobsen, “Bauman on Utopia,” 227.

offers no neutral perspective on the world but a critical, counter-cultural, value oriented and normative utopian vantage point.⁴⁸

Bauman's theories are relevant in the context of this chapter as, even if Keegan operates within a literary universe, that universe becomes a microcosmos for life in general and the aforementioned human condition and experiences that unite us in a state of existential bleakness. Far from offering solutions or ways out of gnarly conundrums, Keegan puts up no exit signs. When her characters are read from a utopian/dystopian perspective, they come across as ruminating and anxiety-ridden individuals exposed (at times voluntarily, eyes wide open as they venture onto paths where things go terribly wrong, yet they are somehow numb and unaware of these likely outcomes) to uncertain and risky situations.

In "The long and painful death," the protagonist's search for domestic stability is in vain when as a writer in residence supposedly focusing on Heinrich Theodor Böll, she suddenly finds her fragile utopian safety zone endangered by a bold intruder who infringes on her personal space and proceeds to discredit and invalidate her. During a momentarily non-committal period in narrative hiding, she lets her guard down whereby her peace is interrupted by this stranger knocking on her door, who shatters her illusion of bliss and safety. The man, a retired professor of German literature, becomes her nemesis and direct threat. As he questions her motives and academic credibility and talks of Ireland not being the same as it once was: ("People

here were poor but they were content"⁴⁹), his is a pestering voice of misogynistic reason, a voice that ultimately serves as a call to action and her break from an idle state of critical disengagement:

'These people – even German people at these conference meetings,' he said. 'We do not understand each other.'

'No?'

'It is all ... jargon. We do not care. We do this because we cannot write, and yet here you are, a writer, in this house of Heinrich Böll, making cakes.'⁵⁰

In Keegan's world of male oppressors, the Irish micronarrative becomes a larger metanarrative. Men taking advantage of women; a tale about sibling rivalry where the apparently downtrodden takes revenge; a girl gone missing; a lonely man not to be trusted and a woman taking the risk of her life by seeking 'love' in all the wrong places; a trusting wife made aware of the truth, her worldly doctor husband and his clingy lover trapped in a triangular drama where, at the end, they are joined in silence – "all three mortals waiting, waiting for somebody to leave"⁵¹; a mother dreaming things "before they happened and found things in her dreams"⁵²; a woman quietly holding it together after breaking away from her "greasy fuck"⁵³ of a postman lover, her eyes betraying her sadness; and a magic realist scene as if taken straight from an apocalyptic passage of *100 Years of Solitude* presents us burning bodies that move collectively as one and are surrounded by cockroaches "everywhere..."⁵⁴

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Keegan, *Walk the Blue Fields*, 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵¹ Keegan, *Antarctica*, 38.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

These are excerpts from short stories representing fragments of experiences whose intensity seems to halt any narrative passing of time until these fictive lives are frozen in surreal unanchored moments that together become a part of Keegan's experimental discourse. The weirdness continues as we move further into the drama and the surreal enters the ordinary, bringing stories to a head and inviting into the narrative an imminent sense of danger that lurks right beneath the surface of normality as we know it. Keegan is the coolly intense master of quick suspense – a writer who swiftly gets to the point and overturns situations, paving the way for a series of twisted outcomes.

What is the symbolic message of these stories and how do they speak not only of the characters' transition from one state to another but also of issues affecting Ireland at large? If *Foster* connected the local with the global in a "glocal" hinterland, reflected Ireland's need for a competitive edge on a European market governed by EEC policies on farming, and hinted at the country's efforts to keep up with foreign competition as a member of the European Economic Community in the mid-1980s, the *Antarctica* collection contributes, in its own way, to a larger narrative and delivers a commentary on Ireland's oscillation between different stages. As Luppino writes, metaphorically:

The images of a "transition" (Kearney 15) or a "conversion" (*Foster* 37), variously used by scholars to describe the major changes undergone by Irish society and culture over the last few decades, read as strikingly appropriate metaphors for the country's recent evolution. The continuous fluctuation of the characters of Irish novels and short stories between different spatial, temporal, and psychological dimensions does not only

translate and transpose the instability of the Irish cultural experience into the fictional realm, but also confirms and validates the paradigm of arrivals and departures as a highly symbolic pattern and an effective hermeneutic tool to look at contemporary Ireland.⁵⁵

Where Colm Tóibín is concerned with the themes of time and adaptability and "illustrates the human capacity to gradually embrace new circumstances" in a type of writing "filled with characters who yearn for better understanding and acceptance, and sometimes escape" and even reinvent,⁵⁶ Keegan offers a contrasting perspective by bringing onto the stage multifaceted protagonists who do not always readily adapt to their new situations. Rather, they are forced to deal with the consequences of their actions and instead of finding relief after being thrown from one impossible situation to another, they are literally stuck within stories that offer no way out. In their author's reluctance to deliver them to safety, the inherent horror of these accounts resides. And, in addition, their credibility and authenticity resides in the psychological unease we experience as we read about the protagonists' fictive entrapment. In that space of "un"-sayability where they are incapable of expressing their fears and premonitions, they become silent witnesses to unfolding events that have a profound impact on how they view and relate to the world around them.

Final reflections: Keegan and the journey into the unknown

Underpinning this paper on select works by Claire Keegan are theories by Bauman, Benjamin, and Sontag that relate to the filmic and photographic quality of her literature and to the complex human condition,

⁵⁵ Luppino, op.cit., 116.

⁵⁶ Duerden, "Colm Tóibín's books: A guide."

and that sometimes overlap. Through its uncommon focus on this theoretical triad of key people active in different eras but where their existential concerns are overarching and relevant across times and distances, my paper does its part to contribute to existing scholarship. As has been highlighted, Keegan's literature is sensorial in the sense that she operates in the spaces between the words where she conjures up images that stay in the reader's mind long after the words have been read. Benjamin and Sontag both see the inherent value of images; with Benjamin examining the world through stories and storytelling and speaking in allegorical terms and Sontag advocating for an "aesthetics of silence". So, too, does Keegan make a mark with a type of storytelling that relies, to an extent, on the reader's own ability to visualise what is being read until the image leaps out from the page and enters our own imagination. Thereby she importantly offers the reader agency and leaves it up to us to fully interpret her stories. Bauman, in turn, talks of the postmodern conundrum where we are unanchored on a sea of uncertainty at a time of existential bleakness – just like Keegan is interested in what is real and stark and difficult.

In Keegan's parallel realities of overlapping dimensions, she opens up spaces for interpretation. It is a world where crude realism resides side by side with the phantasmagorical or surreal that exists on the edge of normality. Her stories are a cross between the hyperrealism of a novel like Camilo José Cela's *The Family of Pascual Duarte* (1942), literary folklore, and the great works of the Magic Realist genre. This is a location where anything can happen at any point in time and where even if the aforementioned intensity of the moment pulls the reader into

situations from which there may be no escape, nothing is entirely static or quite what it seems, and occasional dialogues become secondary to the graphic images that the author breathes life into.

The compact darkness in the suggestive and heightened stories of *Antarctica* – where the spoken word becomes "a commentary on the images, spoken by the images themselves"⁵⁷ – are particularly confronting when the reader is transported into a nightmarish scenario and bleak urban landscape in its opening tale about a straying wife taken on a windy tour through vertiginous streets in an unfamiliar environment where she gradually moves further away from her comfort zone. Held hostage at her lover's apartment she prepares herself for her symbolic, and quite possibly real, death as the cold of a symbolic Antarctica envelops her, followed by Hell, followed by eternity.⁵⁸ And in *Walk the Blue Fields*, Keegan,

charts the tensions and anxieties of contemporary Ireland whether that is through the presentation of the waning of individual and collective faith in Catholicism, a damaged, land-obsessed masculinity, the necessities and repercussions of truth-telling about sexual abuse and family breakdown, or a reawakening femininity.⁵⁹

Unexpectedly, the female protagonist in "The Long and Painful Death" rises to the occasion, ridding herself of her male tormentor who becomes the "mysterious, vanishing visitor" offering "just the inspiration you need."⁶⁰ Equally suggestive "The Parting Gift" (also

⁵⁷ Petersen, "Der Aufbau der Literaturgeschichte," 13.

⁵⁸ Keegan, *Antarctica*, 21.

⁵⁹ Smith, "Autonomy, naturalism, and folklore," 192.

⁶⁰ "Shoulda, Coulda Review."

from the *Walk the Blue Fields* collection), about father-daughter incest, is made particularly effective through its second-person narrative⁶¹ where the writer carefully sets the scene and invites us into a landscape of bending cherry trees, shady chestnuts, and boggy fields where there are bad roads and a few ponies grazing.⁶² A sense of uncanny outlandishness enters texts whose titles refer to animals or nature (“dark horses”, “... the water’s edge”, “a night of ... quicken trees”) and where:

[t]hings get fuzzy if you stare at them for long enough. They can turn into legends and possible witches (like in the *Night of the Quicken Trees*), they can become ghosts that dance at a fireside in a tale well enough told (as in *The Forrester’s Daughter*).

In these two collections of stories and in her literature as a whole, Keegan takes us on a journey into the unknown, into that which cannot be explained but that is very much felt, and where we experience the cold discomfort of being humans forced to stare into the abyss. There is no looking away, there is no one to turn to, no light is apparent at the end of the narrative tunnel. In Keegan’s brief words that speak larger truths we enter a demanding dialogue with ourselves and others, and as we investigate the past, that space of querying and examining history allows us to form a more complete understanding of heavy chapters that have left much pain in their wake. Her role also as a chronicler of facts that must be dragged from obscurity corresponds with Tóibín’s observation:

[It is] quite an exciting time to be a reader in Ireland. It is as though here in Ireland

there’s still things to be said that no one has worked out a way to say yet, and it is as though writers are putting up flags, and big flags, over a place, over a sensibility, or over a story that has not yet been told or else needs a new version.⁶³

Both Keegan and Tóibín demonstrate that they can express with precision what others cannot. They use their literary technique as a vessel for truth telling, with Keegan opting for the short narrative form as a storytelling method in which she engages “the art of silence ... shaped by what remains unsaid as much as by what is said, often in an attempt to illuminate the unsayable”⁶⁴ and unmask “unspoken truths, so that the act of writing itself stretches beyond the limitations of social observation towards an idea of art that is unbound by the ‘conditions’ of writing.”⁶⁵ Using unpretentious, straightforward, and unemotional language, she allows her characters to step forward and come alive as flawed beings that are remarkably real and, in their complexity, disturbingly close to all of us. And while silence prevails, it speaks louder than words until it undeniably becomes its own “form of speech.”⁶⁶

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⁶¹ This is likewise a literary move in Carlos Fuentes’s, *Aura*, 1962.

⁶² Keegan, *Walk the Blue Fields*, 29, 31.

⁶³ Flood, “Colm Tóibín,” 2024.

⁶⁴ D’Hoker, op. cit., 88.

⁶⁵ Smith, “Elemental and plain,” 2.

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